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SUBJECT: AFGHANS, INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY MARK WOMEN'S DAY

1) SUMMARY: Afghans and the international community marked International Women's Day with speeches, demonstrations, and marches across Afghanistan. At a rally in a Kabul high school auditorium organized by the Ministry of Women's Affairs, President Hamid Karzai called on men and religious leaders to promote education for women and to end the practices of child marriage and using women as currency. The U.S. Embassy issued several grants and held a lunch attended by more than 60 Afghan female activists and leaders, including the Minister of Women's Affairs. Still, many editorialists argued that women continue to face violence and discrimination and predicted that to change this would take considerable time. END SUMMARY

2) President Karzai took the lead in marking International Women's Day at a rally of several hundred women held in a Kabul high school gymnasium on March 8. Karzai, who was joined by Minister of Women's Affairs Husein Banu Ghaznifar and other female officials, called on men and religious leaders to promote female education. According to press reports, Karzai said that Afghanistan needed more female nurses and doctors. He also urged Afghan families to stop child marriages and using females as currency. "I call on the people," he said, according to press reports, "they shouldn't give [girls] to old men and they shouldn't give them in forced marriages."

3) Elsewhere in Kabul, Fatana Ishaq Gailani, the chairwoman of the Afghanistan Women's Association, hosted a seminar at the Ministry of Information and Culture, and the Massoud Foundation held an event marking the day. The United Nations Assistance Mission to Afghanistan (UNAMA) hosted a festival at the Kabul Women's Garden that included a film on the lives of Afghan women, a mini-circus, and a play advocating increased investment in Afghan women.

4) In Kandahar, several hundred women marched to the Kandahar Women's Association, according to media reports. The director of the association, Rona Tarin, told the Associated Press, "We want to give our message to all the Western women. Afghan women are facing a lot of problems. Women should have a right to education. We want to work shoulder to shoulder with men." In the north, according to UNAMA, women toured provincial capitals holding public meetings on "Giving Women Voices," with the participation of provincial governors, women's councils, local police, judges and religious leaders.

5) In Western Farah Province, the Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) held a special women's shura, which attracted approximately 30 participants, including a female police major and many nursing students. Looking ahead to the next five years, the women said they dreamed of having a university in Farah, more females in government,

better educational opportunities for females, factories where women could work, and a park for women. Commenting on the recent spate of self-immolation occurring among young women in Farah (64 over the past 2 months), they said women in Farah needed better information on their rights and a women's shelter where they could also receive vocational training.

6) In Eastern Khost Province, approximately 500 women and girls attended a ribbon cutting ceremony at a new PRT-funded women's park in central Khost. The event included speeches by local provincial leaders and the head of the women's shura. A prominent Khost mullah noted that women's rights are human rights in Islam, and stressed the importance of education. Some women at the event informally urged the government to do more to protect girls at schools, and noted that while women in central Khost had opportunities, those in remote areas still suffered from lack of resources and traditional cultural biases.

7) Also in the east, the Kunar Province Department of Women's Affairs hosted an event at Fatima Girls' High School in the provincial capital Asadabad on March 8. Approximately 150 women and 50 men attended. The Governor, the PRT and UNAMA helped support the event, while ISAF donated scarves, bowls, cooking pots, school backpacks, and volleyballs to be given to 50 widows identified by the Provincial Council, and as awards to high-achieving teachers. Men filled the first three rows of the audience and women attendees were unable to remove their burkas due to the presence of media and cameras. Messages from the various speakers were relatively vague, including a smattering of slogans like "stop violence against women," and "recognize the woman's role in your household." Because of the structure of the event and the presence of men and women together, senior female leaders--provincial council members, headmistresses of schools, etc.--seemed reticent speak or

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participate, according to the PRT officer.

8) The U.S. Embassy hosted a lunch for more than 60 prominent female educators, civil society activists, and officials from the Ministry of Women's Affairs, including the present and former ministers. Noted Afghan female singer Baseera Hilay performed for the occasion. The Embassy also gave out several grants totaling nearly \$30,000 USD for the training of female journalists in radio production and media management and for remote English language instruction between Afghan and American NGOs. The Embassy also hosted a three-way digital video conference between female civil society activists from the U.S., Tajikistan, and Afghanistan to discuss women's issues and the role of women in their respective societies.

9) Many Kabul editorialists marked March 8 with newspaper columns. Most, however, focused on the daily violence and oppression still faced by women and the long road ahead in their struggle for equality. Pro-government Erada daily, in a March 8 editorial, opined, "Despite a lot of changes which have occurred in the lives of women as a result of efforts made by Afghan women and the international community, there are a lot of challenges and obstacles which Afghan women are facing now, and government officials have not been able to bring a tangible change in these matters. The majority of government officials who possess key positions within the government do not believe in women's rights."

10) Hasht-e-Subh, an independent secular daily, wrote, "The woman's identity has remained limited to the roles of sisters or, at best, mothers, with no right to step out of the house and show their capabilities to the patriarchal societies. The women's identity remains limited to being machines for giving birth and raising children... Those women who dared to break the chains and reveal their talent and capabilities to the rest of society were forced by the men to remain interdicted and silent. Finally, we can say that the proclamation of International Women's Day is marked by women, who remain subservient to men, every year as a symbolic event, and then the women remain forgotten for the remaining 364 days of the year."

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